

Water - The New Fad

Category: Holidays, Sukkot

In previous generations, water was considered undignified. What changed? And what does it have to do with the water sacrifice in the Temple on Sukkot?

Water vs. Wine

Have you noticed the fad of the water bottle? In recent years, people come to class with water bottles, and every important meeting, each important person has a bottle of water on the table in front of them. By those million-dollar banquets, the participants are given only water to drink. Everywhere you go these days, anyone who considers himself anything is always carrying a water bottle.

But not too long ago, the popular thing to drink was soda and other soft drinks. In the days of our grandparents, the custom was to serve tea or coffee. Historians say that during the Middle Ages all they would drink was wine, and no one would dare to serve plain water to his guests. That would have been the biggest insult. Water is for animals! Only the poorest and lowliest people would drink that stuff!

The truth is that wine is quite an honorable drink. Wine plays a very important role in our tradition. We make the Kiddush on Shabbat and Holidays over a cup of wine. In fact, any important blessing or ceremony like a Bris Mila, a Chupa and a Pidyon Haben, is done specifically over a cup of wine. Even Havdala, although it can legally be recited over any 'respectable' drink, such as beer, tea or coffee should preferably be made on wine. Yet, no religious ceremony is ever performed over a glass of water.

The Big Sukkot Celebration

However, there was one special service with water.

In the days of the Holy Temple, wine was added to many of the daily sacrifices offered on the Mizbe'ach. But once a year, on Sukkos, water was poured on the altar as well. Every morning, together with the daily Tamid sacrifice, the Kohen would pour a little water that had been drawn from the Shiloach well onto the

Altar together with the wine.

The Gemara explains that since G-d judges the world's supply water on Sukkos; i.e. how much water the world will receive, in what form the water will come, hurricanes, tsunamis etc., the Torah commanded us to add a water libation to the Sukkos sacrifices so that the waters of the coming year will be only 'waters of blessing.'

In the time of the Second Temple, this became a huge ceremony and celebration in Jerusalem. Until this day, we refer to the Sukkos evening parties as "שמחת בית השואבה" the 'Water Drawing Celebration'. All the people of Jerusalem would come together in the Temple at the onset of night. The leaders of the generation would dance and juggle torches before the people, entertaining them and encouraging great rejoicing throughout the entire night. Then, in the predawn hours of the morning, the trumpets were sounded and the celebrants would set out to draw the waters from the Shiloach well. These waters were escorted amidst great rejoicing to the Altar, where, at daybreak, they were poured together with the Tamid sacrifice's wine libation.

And the Gemara concludes, 'he who has not witnessed the "שמחת בית השואבה" has never seen true joy in his life.'

The Argument

Why did the sages of the Second Temple make such a big deal over this water libation?

The Rebbe explains that in the days of the Second Temple, there was a group called the Sadducees. These were Jews who denied the legitimacy of the Oral Law, claiming that only the Written Torah was divine. They believed that the Oral Law was an invention of the Rabbis, and there was therefore no obligation to follow it.

This group essentially didn't believe in any part of Torah, but to make such a claim publicly would repel people from joining their party. Therefore, they professed dissent with the Oral Law, in affect freeing them from most Jewish duties. This group attracted many thousands of followers, mainly the wealthy Jews or those of high offices looking for a way out of the Torah's many social

restrictions. The majority of Jews, those who did accept the Oral Law as part of G-d's Torah, were called the *prushim*.

The pouring of the water libation was a rabbinic institution, a mitzvah that the Sadducees did not accept as true.

The Gemara tells the story of Yanai, a Sadducee who was the Jewish King as well as the self-appointed high priest. He was from the priestly family of the Chashmonites who, after the miracles of Chanukah, took on the role of the Jewish royalty.

King Yanai made a feast to which the Jewish sages were also invited. During the feast Yanai excused himself and reappeared wearing the royal crown and with the Golden Tzitz (the High Priest's ceremonial headdress - a golden plate with the words 'Holy unto G-d' embossed upon it) upon his forehead.

One of the elders of the *prushim* was so pained by the sight of this sacrilege that he called out to the king, "The crown of royalty is honorable for you but leave the crown of priesthood to the priests!"

Yanai was so infuriated by this remark that he demanded that the other sages judge the rebel and sentence him to death for insulting the king. The sages refused to pass the death sentence upon their colleague, and from that day, Yanai loathed the *prushim* and constantly tormented them.

One Sukkos, Yanai, in his role as High Priest, did not pour the water libation onto the altar. Instead, he poured the water onto his feet. The huge congregation that had gathered from all over the world for the holiday was enraged by this chutzpa and King Yanai was pelted from all sides by thousands of Esrogim. Yanai, in his frenzied anger, ordered the non-Jewish guards he employed to put an end to the uprising. They did so, killing thousands of Jews in the courtyard of the Holy Temple.

The Rebbe explains that in order to dispel any doubt in the minds of the people and to stress the importance of rabbinical institutions, the celebration accompanying this mitzvah became one of the highlights of the Jewish year. The importance of the ceremony was also evident in the fact that women also took part in the "שמחת בית השואבה" - so they should also be convinced of the falsehood of the Sadducees' arguments.

Water Is Better

What precisely was the argument between the Saducees and the *Prushim*? What was it about the water libation that the Saducees could not accept?

The Rebbe explains that the difference between water and wine symbolizes the essential disagreement between the two parties. Water lacks definition, for it has no taste, while wine has a very distinct taste. The law states that before a person must recite a blessing before he enjoys any food, and that's why we say a blessing over wine. But water has no taste to be enjoyed. Therefore, unless a person is thirsty and is drinking water to quench his thirst, he need not recite any blessing over a glass of water.

This divide can also be found in our daily service of G-d. Most people will agree to fulfill a command that they can understand and appreciate the reasoning behind it, while they would not be willing to follow any command that in their mind is unreasonable. However, when we accepted the Torah from G-d at Mt. Sinai, we told Him "נעשה ונשמע". We would first concentrate on fulfilling His commandments and only then would we work to understand them. We would fulfill the Mitzvos which we could not understand (chukim) with an obedience that transcends logic.

Here is where the water comes in. Water, which has no taste, is symbolic of when we perform Mitzvos only because we are thirsty, thirsty for the word of G-d.

This was the Sadducee argument. Any mitzvah that stands on logical grounds, like offering the respectable gift of tasty wine to G-d on the Altar, they would agree to do. But they were not ready to offer water as a sacrifice or to perform any other mitzvah that cannot be logically explained.

The problem is that when people do good things only because they are logically right, they can end up committing horrific crimes 'justifiably' because anything can be twisted to sound right and moral, even killing! We've seen proof of this in our own times. But if one keeps the Mitzvos, whether they are logical or not, simply because we are commanded to do so, he can never go wrong.

So, in our days, as we come closer and closer to the days of Moshiach, water is becoming more and more accepted as a normal popular drink. This tasteless

liquid has become an important commodity, because, deep down everybody is coming to the realization that in order to remain strong and morally upright, we must accept the Torah's commandments obediently, for it is the word of the living G-d.